Cracks in the Wall of Silence

Thousands of new documents about Dallas show how the Kennedys may have inadvertently fed the conspiracy machine. BY GERALD POSNER

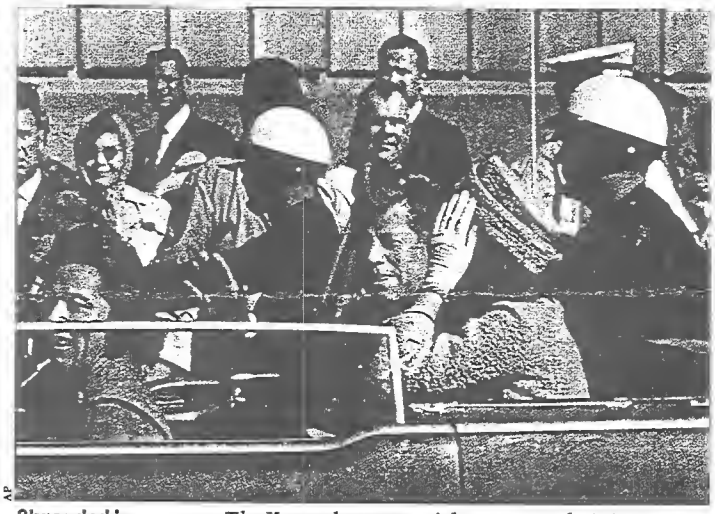
ON SATURDAY, JAN. 4, 1975, A HURRIED MEETING WAS called in the Oval Office. Present were Gerald Ford, president for five months, Henry Kissinger and Brent Scowcroft. News had recently broken about past abuses by the CIA. Kissinger, who had just finished a breakfast with ex-CIA director Richard Helms, was blunt. "Helms said all these stories are just the tip of the iceberg," Kissinger reported to the president. "If they come out, blood will flow. For example, Robert Kennedy personally managed the operation on the assassination of Castro." That possibility startled Ford, one of the original members of the Warren Commission that had concluded in 1964 that a lone assassin—Lee Harvey Oswald—had killed JFK. Warren Commission members had been kept in the dark about American efforts to kill Castro even though Oswald had led his own pro-Castro movement and had tried to enter Cuba shortly before he murdered Kennedy.

The 1975 Oval Office meeting is related in a memorandum declassified this past July by the Assassination Records Review Board, an independent commission of five historical, legal and archival experts. The review board's mandate was to locate all documents that "related" to the assassination. Before it closed its doors last week, the commission aggressively pursued files from government agencies, the KGB and private citizens. It opened more than 4 million pages of secret material. In its final report, the board justifiably castigated many government agencies for not having released papers years earlier. The board arranged for the Zapruder film to become public property, secured records relating to former New Orleans district attorney Jim Garrison's failed assassination investigation, located notes from Oswald's police interrogations and took sworn statements from many key witnesses. While the new files provide many peripheral details of the events surrounding the assassination, they do not challenge the basic conclusion that Oswald alone killed JFK.

Their most important contribution may be documents that shed light on the role of Bobby Kennedy after the assassination. The traditional view is that Bobby was not interested in the Warren Commission's work because he was overcome with grief. In new files, however, RFK emerges as someone intent on protecting his brother's reputation and hiding any possible connection to the operations against Castro. But Robert Kennedy's defensiveness had enormous unintended consequences: he may have inadvertently been responsible for many key questions raised by conspiracy buffs over the decades.

It started immediately. New records reveal the extent to which Bobby, Jacqueline and Kennedy aides pressed the autopsy doctors to speed their work. The autopsy itself was not thorough, leading to significant errors that were later seized upon by conspiracy enthusiasts. Moreover, the Kennedys were insistent that nothing be made public—even in death—of the doctors' discovery that the president did indeed suffer from Addison's disease, a rare chronic illness.

The review board located a new witness who suggested there might have been a second set of photos of JFK's corpse, something conspiracists have suggested might prove there was a second gunman. But the set the witness helped develop had "no blood or opening cavities" and the wounds were much smaller than those evident in the official photos. This suggests that the Kennedys merely wanted sanitized images for possible public release.



Shrouded in secrecy: *The Kennedys were quick to protect their interests*

The panel also seems to put one of the more gruesome mysteries of the murder to rest. The review board obtained the first testimony proving that Kennedy's military physician, Adm. George Burkley, left Bethesda carrying the president's brain in a bucket. He said he was going to "deliver it to Robert Kennedy." JFK's brain has never been found, and was presumably later interred with the president at Arlington. Indeed, family feeling, not official misconduct, seems to be a more plausible explanation for the questions that surround Dallas. Just after the autopsy, for example, the Kennedys asked many of those present to promise not to talk about the procedure for 25 years. Conspiracy buffs pointed to that wall of silence as proof of a continuing cover-up, when in fact the doctors and staff were merely adhering to the wishes of the family.

Beyond the autopsy, Bobby may have worried that the Warren Commission might stumble onto the government's plots to kill Castro. To be fair, RFK's role in those efforts is unclear, and even the Ford-Helms-Kissinger exchange does not settle the question. One thing is certain: Bobby did not want the Warren Commission investigating Cuba. In fact, when Earl Warren directly asked him about the subject, RFK did not tell him anything. The CIA also lied to the commission.

The newly released documents highlight that the Kennedys' interference over parts of the investigation might have served their own personal interests in the short term, but were a tremendous disservice to history in the long run. The files released by the review board prove there was indeed a cover-up, but not of the assassination.

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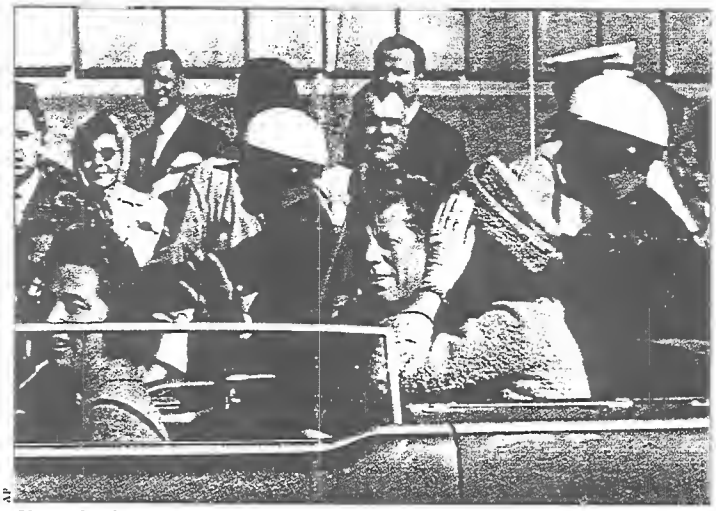

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